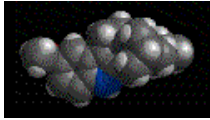


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The Religion of Iboga or the Bwiti of the Fangs

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Lecture given at the closing session of the course of instruction for the class of 1981 on July 10, 1981.



Genie of the Waters
Mask
Fang Bwiti
Gabon

Among the different countries of central Africa, Gabon is certainly one of the most fascinating and mysterious. Its geographic location accounts for its equatorial water and climate conditions and the existence of a dense forest which was long a barrier to the establishment of routes of communication and delayed the exploitation of its natural resources. This forest which is penetrable only with difficulty and is the site of an invisible and fantastic world of the spirits has an irresistible effect on the individuals. Also, the different ethnic groups, some forty in all, remain isolated from each other and retain their way of life, traditions, rites and beliefs.

In the words of Bureau, "Gabon is to Africa what Tibet is to Asia, the spiritual center of religious initiations".

We will concentrate our attention more particularly on two ethnic groups and two regions:

Tsogo land and the Mitsogos;

Woleu N'Tem and the Fangs or Pahouins.

Tsogo land extends from Fernan Vaz lagoon in the West to Chaillu Mountains in the East, named after the explorer Paul Belloni du Chaillu who, from 1857 to 1865, penetrated in the interior of the country. This region is flat and dotted with lagoons along the ocean shores; it becomes rugged and mountainous east of Mouila and reaches an altitude of 1575 meters on Mount Iboundji. It is covered by a thick, oppressive forest which in most places forms a veritable canopy of vegetation.

The mountains are always veiled by mist, and the combination of a low degree of sunlight and a high humidity accounts for the rather low temperature, particularly during the dry season. "It is an unhealthy type of heat, the kind of heat you associate with fever and hospitals", said G. Simenon in his novel "Coup de lune" in 1932.

Because of the inhospitable natural surroundings, the damp warmth of the valleys, the tribal wars of the last century in which the Mitsogos were driven back by the Bakeles between the left bank of the Ogoue and the Ngounie, the villages are located on the high grounds.

The essential preoccupation of the Mitsogos is the Bwiti, a primitive Bwiti. According to Raponda Walker, the Bwiti of the Mitsogos may be defined as "a male secret society that has its rites, its regulations, its secret sessions and public sessions". There is no supreme chief for all of the tribes that have adopted it and each village practices the Bwiti independently of the others, under the authority of a local president. To join the sect, you have to take an oath and swear "Na bwiti a besu" (by our bwiti) before receiving an initiation with the sacred plant iboga.

The Bwiti originally belonged to the Mitsogos and also to the Okandes and the peoples of the Eshire group; subsequently, it extended down to the coastal areas, the regions of the Middle Ogoue and the Woleu N'Tem where the Fangs are to be found.



Tabernanthe iboga
flower

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The Woleu N'Tem, the northernmost region of Gabon, is relatively isolated from the rest of the country by the chain of Crystal Mountains. This Plateau is difficult to reach and is situated at an elevation of 700 to 1200 meters. A single winding road goes there. It is along this road, somewhere between Oyem and Mitzic, that Pierre Benoit laid the plot of his novel "Monsieur de la Ferte".

In this region of Woleu N'Tem, "the novelist describes the equatorial forest as gloomy, hostile, frightful, and evil. Every backwater pool teems with caimans, and as soon as nightfall comes to the bivouac, you can expect at any time to see lizards and snakes fall into the wrought iron mess kits. But, still according to Pierre Benoit, these terrifying and unseen hosts are nothing compared to the men who haunt the Gabon forest". These men are the Fangs or Pahouins. They probably came from central Africa, perhaps from the regions of Ubangi and Chari, fleeing before Islam in a southwesterly direction toward the ocean. They are sure of their own strength and of their ability to dominate, eager to receive that which is new, convinced that they can integrate all techniques and ideas into their own culture, and it became obvious around 1910 and especially since 1925 that they would take possession of the primitive Bwiti of the Mitsogos and modify it. To it they added their memories, their traditions and introduced ideas and rites that came from Catholicism; finally, they initiated men and women. However, the chants usually remained in the Tsogo language, the official language which is to Bwiti what Latin is to the Church.

Currently, the primitive Bwiti of the Mitsogos is on the decline while the Bwiti of the Fangs is expanding, though perhaps, according to some, it is losing a little of its initial purity.

The Gabon forest is a veritable phytotherapeutic gold mine and its plants are an element indispensable to sylvan life and rites. Among the plants with magical properties, the most widely used is the sacred plant, a type of apocynacea, Tabernanthe iboga, the foundation of the Bwiti and the basis of visions of the next world.

Tabernanthe iboga is a small smooth shrub that grows up to a height of 1.5 meters. The flowers are white with pink spots and the ellipsoid fruits have globular seeds. It has a pivoting branching root that is more or less twisted. When you chew its bark, it has a bitter, astringent taste and produces an anesthetic sensation after a few minutes. The alkaloids are found mainly in the cortex of this root but are contained in every part of the plant. The number of alkaloids known at this time is 22. The principal ones are:

Ibogaine
Tabernanthine
Ibogaline.

Ibogaine and the related alkaloids have very special properties. In low doses, ibogaine reduces sleep, makes it possible to resist hunger and fatigue, activates circulation and respiration, promotes and activates secretions and diuresis.

In high doses, it produces a hallucinatory inebriation with motor incoordination, and sometimes a state of lethargy lasting 4 to 5 days. In massive doses, ibogaine may cause death as a result of bulbar involvement and paralysis of the respiratory muscles. The essential effect is its hallucinogenic property. The drug is a psychodysleptic that produces a state of anxiety and extreme apprehension and a visual hallucination, considerably enhanced by darkness, the ambiance and suggestion. This action is not unlike that of LSD, mescaline and amphetamines.

The current studies by Goutarel, Potier and Dacosta suggest that these are substances of particular interest which produce an increased state of wakefulness without producing side effects.

The Pygmies attribute the discovery of this plant to the warthogs who, it seems, are very fond of it. These animals dig holes at the foot of the iboga shrubs to chew the bark of the roots. They then go into a state of wild frenzy, leaping and fleeing as though they were prey to terrifying visions. Porcupines and gorillas also search for these roots.

This plant was recommended for use in human clinical practices in 1905 by Pouchet and

Chevallier who advocated it in the treatment of neurasthenia and in convalescence, and by Kuborn who recommended it in the treatment of sleeping sickness. The iboga alkaloids have their place in the pharmacopoeia under the name of Lambarene and glutaminic Lambarene B2 PP; these products were withdrawn from the market about ten years ago. Iboga is still used as a stimulant by hunters and warriors who stalk at night, by trackers, and by those who paddle canoes and pirogues. Actually, iboga is reserved for the bwiti cult. This sacred plant has served to unify a whole people, and to some extent has enabled it to resist the influence of Western civilization.

Iboga is the very source of the bwiti religion, commonly called "religion of Eboga". Iboga gives knowledge of the beyond through the spiritual death, in advance of its time, that it produces. By the visions that it brings about, ritual mastication of iboga permits contact with ancestors and gods: Mebeghe is the name of the divinity in the Fangs, a supreme being without mother or father or spouse. It engenders the three divinities by bursting the divine primordial egg.

Nzame-Mebeghe, God, is born with his brothers and sister but remains pure.

Nyingone-Mebeghe, "sister of God", the female principle of the universe, goddess of fertility and of the night. At the instigation of Evus, she committed Nsem, incest, with None. As punishment, she must carry the earth on her head.

None-Mebeghe, the third individual in the divinity, the male principle, has committed Nsem.

Ekurana has issued fourth from the placenta and umbilical body of the divine egg. It possesses thunder and makes order reign.

Evus, twin brother of Ekurana, has been punished with a thunder clap on orders from Nzame. He is the tempter and initiator of Nsem.

All of these divinities are represented in the temple, the place for night-time ceremonies, the place for celebrations on the occasion of feasts and initiations, the place for funeral dances on the death of a person of standing. The temple may also serve as a meeting room, as a courthouse or a guardhouse. It is called Mbandja. It is a vast rectangular hut, measuring on the average twenty meters in length and ten meters in width, completely closed in the back, partially or completely closed on the sides, and with a wide opening in the front. The dimensions depend on the size of the village, the repute of the chiefs, the number of followers and their wealth. The long axis is laid out northeast by southwest, parallel to the route followed by the Pahouin group during its migration in the last century. The roof is covered with ordinary matting or with raphia leaves or preferably with leaves of sclerosperma, a sort of dwarf palm. The curved canopy must always be made of sclerosperma leaves. The framework is supported by different columns. The great column with a highly sculpted base, situated at the entrance to the temple, partly hidden by the canopy, has an essential symbolism. At the foot of it burns a torch of oleoresin of *Copaifera religiosa* from the sacred tree Olumi or Andzem. Among the Mitsogos, the column rests on the remains of ancestors (skulls and tibias) and it is strictly forbidden to lean against it out of respect for the ancestors. When it is no longer used because of its deteriorated condition, it is laid down with care and takes its place in a corner of the temple or against the sacred tree.

The sanctuary proper is located in the completely closed back part. This is where the musicians and the chief of the community, the Kombo, will take their places. In the same location, we can see the Bwiti symbolized in the form of small carved statuettes. The side walls of the temple are sometimes bare or may be decorated, painted, or may be hung with emblems: snake skins, trophies, musical instruments. There are often bas-reliefs highlighted by very lively colors and wooden boards decorated with paintings. The use of iboga which gives colored visions may not be unrelated to this decorative art. Despite the sacred character of the temple, travelers or strangers may stop there for a rest, and one often sees old people sitting there, smoking their pipe.

Indeed, everything there is a symbol. Bwiti writings describe perfectly the significance of its principal elements. This temple represents the image of man lying on his back. The ground covered by the canopy represents the legs. The back of the temple, the sanctuary, represents the head. An indoor wood fire is the heart. The navel is depicted by a round piece of basketwork or a bicycle wheel suspended from the roof. It symbolizes the place where all the world's creatures are connected to the divinity, and what an excellent symbol is the use of the wheel and its infinite

number of spokes to express complex metaphysical concepts. The carved main column represents the external sex organ of this man stretched out on his back, as the bwitists say, "a link between the sky and the earth". It supports the crest of the roof which, with the rafters, represents the spine. Along the axis of the temple, the center of the column is pierced with a hole of 10 to 20 centimeters in diameter which is far higher than it is wide. This is the female external sex organ. Binet has specified its symbolism and has emphasized this complementarity of the sexes. It is the door that every man goes through as he comes into the world. It is the "ozamboga", the opening to the future hoped for by the Fangs after completing their migration with so many difficulties. At the same time, it is a window that opens out on the beyond which permits communication from one world to the next. A second smaller hole above represents the gate of heaven through which one must pass to join God. It divides the temple into a left and a right part. According to Binet, who has made a particular study of the Bwiti of the Fangs, one should enter on the right side, i.e., the "left foot", and go out on the left side. The right side symbolizes life, the sun and man: it is the men's chamber. The left side symbolizes death, the moon and woman: it is the women's chamber. At the location of the neck is a second pillar that represents Nyingone in a state of expiation for the incest, the Nsem, that she committed with None under the influence of Evus. For this purpose, she must have her hands raised and lift up the earth above her head; the planet is then both a diadem and a burden. Above is a depiction of a knot symbolizing the bond between the here and now and the beyond, between earthly existence and divine existence.

Thus, the first half of the temple presents binary realities, the male side and the female side, with the influence of None and Nyingone. The deepest part, that of the chancel, situated past the fire, has a ternary symbolism, because we also see the action of the sky with Nzame. That is where the breath of God passes.

In the back is the harp player and the two musicians who play the obaka, a sort of sonorous rod symbolizing the sound of the hammer on the anvil originally made by None. That is the place where the Kombo, chief and father of the community, holds office; he will direct all of the ceremonies, dominated by chanting and dancing. The musical instruments are numerous and symbolic. The rattle is carried by the initiates in the right hand. It symbolizes the genital organs of Bunenge who, according to Fangs mythology, died while picking fruit in an "atangatier". His body was found by his wife Benzogho in the river. The fly-whisk symbolizes the genital organs of his wife Benzogho, sacrificed after taking iboga which had made it possible for her to see her husband again. Benzogho, initiated by the Pigmies, paid with her life for the knowledge she acquired and is responsible for the foundations of the Bwiti. The musical bow symbolizes Nzame, whose wood represents the spinal column. It is very difficult to play this instrument and the Mitsogos are the only specialists. The clear-toned rod or obaka punctuates all events, and notably the bursting of the divine egg. It symbolizes the deafening din of thunder. The eight-stringed harp (Ngoma or Ngombi) issued forth from the body of Benzogho. It is a cithara in which each string represents a part of his body. It also symbolizes maternal and paternal relationships and is a veritable family organization chart. The harp made of Anzem wood is the object of exceptional veneration. It is considered as a living being. Initiated, dressed and bathed, it possesses a celestial spirit within its body.

A high priest poetically described the role of the instrument and the music as follows: "To see God, one must eat the body of God symbolized by iboga, and the cithara, Ngoma, takes us by the hand and leads us toward God. It is a pirogue that takes us from the here and now to the beyond, from the profane world to the sacred world, from the world of the living to that of the dead". When the harp plays, it is woman who cries, and the woman is Benzogho, the first victim of Eboga. The great moments of the cult are announced by the horn, usually an antelope horn, and the hand bell which plays an essential role and sets the rhythm of the prayers. It notifies the arrival of new participants and the deposit of offerings at the foot of the second column. It symbolizes the heartbeats of God. The audience also sings to the rhythm of tom-toms and cattle bells made of round fruits, sort of leguminous plants with large seeds.

Like most religions, Bwiti has initiation ceremonies, a ritual, a liturgy. The initiation ceremonies remain secret, and among the Fangs take place on a Wednesday or a Thursday. They are followed by several ritual nights. The initiation, which takes place from the age of 10 to 12, the age of discretion, must be received as a great honor and is indispensable for understanding the

ways of the "things of the earth". No one may be initiated without first chewing iboga in a sufficient quantity to bring about visions of the beyond.

The plant of initiation, the Ndjimba, is situated in the midst of the forest, among the Mitsogos. It is the site of secret sessions. It is located in a place fairly far from the village, under a *Copaifera religiosa*, Olumi or Andzem, a tree with a red trunk whose color contrasts with the green of the forest, the tallest tree, a mysterious tree that resounds when struck because of the hardness of its wood, a tree that insures riches, honors and fame. The resin of its bark is used to prepare torches, and a decoction provides the lustral water necessary for washing the Bwiti statuettes and the purification of the followers. Among the Fangs, the Ndjimba, against the backdrop of the forest, is a short distance from the temple and often right opposite in a place swept perfectly clean, surrounded by tree trunks that serve as benches. That is where the future initiates gather. One always finds there the tree with a straight trunk whose size symbolizes how difficult it is for a man to rise to the divine level.

Between the Ndjimba and the temple is the Otunga, the very place of the sacrifice that must be paid to be accepted for the new spiritual birth. The Otunga is often a tree. It is in fact a trial and symbolically the leader of the chorus is beaten there and thrown to the ground.

The initiation begins with a bath in a forest stream while the cithara is heard. The candidates receive a handful of freshly picked iboga roots, a set quantity chosen for each of them. They use small baskets of woven rattan, the size of saucers, manufactured for this purpose and tied together three by three. The young sometimes show a certain reluctance to chew these roots, and they may be given the contents of a gourd to drink, consisting of water in which the iboga root has been macerated. The boy often vomits, but that is a good sign because "you must vomit (everything) up to the first drop of milk", meaning that you must totally reject earthly life to accede to another life. Very quickly, highly colored images appear, the initiates lose consciousness of the outer world and fall into a deep sleep on a mat laid out on the ground. The state of lethargy depends on the dose of iboga ingested and may last 4 to 5 days during which time no food is taken. The purpose of absorbing this "beverage of bitterness" is to be able to see the beyond thanks to the hallucinogenic properties of iboga, to communicate with God and the ancestors, and to die on this earth in order to be reborn closer to God.

During the period of lethargy, the initiate sees fantastic apparitions. An endless procession of masked, bony, lame, crippled, grimacing, terrible dead files past rapidly. The belly is always open, as a consequence of ritual autopsy. Gradually, the specters disappear, the visions dissipate and the initiate recovers from his state of inebriation and dazed condition.

The initiates then undergo a thorough examination by the Kombo and must be able to answer the questions to determine whether they have seen Bwiti, how he appeared to them and what he told them. If the answers are satisfactory, the successful candidate is admitted into the sect. In the opposite case, which is rare, a new initiation with iboga must be performed.

However, it is not all over yet for the young initiate. Ibama Ngadi, the thunder plant, a ritual solution that burns like pimento, is poured into his eyes while he stares directly at the sun. The purpose is to show him that now that he has experienced the initiatory light, he can henceforth look at the profane light of the sun without being blinded by its rays.

There are three degrees in the initiation, or three levels of maturity corresponding to childhood, adulthood and old age. The Bandji is the young initiate; when a Bandji proves to have sufficient maturity, he will be made a Nima, and will soon be a Nima Na Kombo. The Kombo is the chief, the patriarch who belongs to the assembly of ancestors. He sees to it in the community that the secrets are not divulged.

This initiation is followed by three Ngozes, ritual nights, whose names are:
the first night, Efun, the genesis
the second night, Mesoso, the bath
the third night, Otunga, the dues.

The ritual nights, or Ngozes, take place from sunset to sunrise. Night, the time of fertility but

also the time of the moon and the earth, must be as inconspicuous as possible. The Ngozes are scheduled long ahead of time. There is a calendar of holy days patterned on that of the Catholic Church. Christmas and Easter are major celebrations. The Ngozes usually take place after the initiation rites. A Ngoze can also be held to make up for the initiation of a prematurely deceased relative, or offer prayers to the dead, to find out the cause of a disease and to cure it, to get manioc, fish, and children. Ritual nights are public and anyone may be invited to attend. Actually, non initiates depart before the important rites begin: one cannot remain until dawn for several nights in succession without chewing iboga. By morning on the day of worship, the Mbandja is decorated with garlands, with greenery, particularly from palms and creeping club mosses (lycopodia) or ferns of the *Platycerium stemaria* type (it should be mentioned that this plant has another purpose and there is a preparation made for the care and preservation of the hair, consisting of ashes of *Platycerium stamaria* leaves and vegetable butter, to be applied in the morning and the evening). The followers prepare to take part in the worship by chewing some pieces of iboga root. Alcohol and wine are also distributed in moderate quantity. Prior to any ceremony, purification by fire is performed by the leader of the chorus. He brandishes a torch of okoume resin, circulating in all directions inside the temple. The women decorate the forehead of the initiates with a red vertical line and a white horizontal line as a symbol of the male and the female sex. The women wear a white robe and the men who rank high in the hierarchy wear a large white robe and a red belt. Once the assembly is gathered, the Kombo gives the news and the instructions for the day. The ceremony, announced by sounding the horn, takes place at night in three stages:

- The Efun, that is to say, the origins, the genesis, the birth and the beginning of God, marks the beginning of the ceremonies. The musical bow and the obaka are heard: this is the bursting of the divine egg. At midnight, at the sound of the horn, the initiates kneel, addressing Nzame in their prayers, thus ending the celebration of the genesis;
- Mvenge, death, the second stage, relates the life and death of the individual, often with scenes that more or less depict the passion of Christ. As the dancing and chanting reach their highest intensity, the cithara is heard and Bwiti will materialize by the appearance in the forest of a cross of straw and wood several meters high which is set ablaze and waved in all directions. It may also appear in the form of banana leaves in an oval design with two torches for the eyes and one for the mouth in the center;
- The third stage is the beyond, or Meyaya. The rites of the descent into the grave are performed before the kneeling assembly. The faithful, torch in hand, then leave the temple and go through the main streets of the village, taking three steps forward and two steps back. This night march when the moon is at its zenith is particularly impressive and majestic. The horn sounds, announcing each move and setting the pace for this retreat in single file. After this long walk, they return to the Mbandja. The dancing will continue uninterruptedly until dawn's early light. The night-time ritual has made them pass from daylight to daylight, from the here and now to the beyond, and night has been erased. The faithful will go to sleep. In addition to the sensations produced by the mastication of iboga, they will feel the inebriation due to palm wine and the smoke of Indian hemp.

Thus, during 12 hours by the clock, from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., the uninterrupted, endlessly diversified concatenation of chants, dances and rites performed by individuals perfectly familiar with the symbolic actions leaves an impression of impenetrability.

The next day, despite the physical and mental exhaustion, will be a day of feasting and the menu will be presented in a large cooking pot with meat, fish, bananas, taros, prepared exclusively by the women.

Such is the Bwiti. Some conclusions are called for in order to understand this religion better.

By definition, the doctrine of a secret society is reserved solely for the initiates. The fear of punishment is a major obstacle to the disclosure of secrets, by deference to the ancestors and the pride of keeping such "great secrets".

The Bwiti is, first and foremost, a remembrance of great ancestors whose skulls and tibias are piously preserved, but although that is the primary goal, it is not the only one.

This society which includes the notables of the village permits a discussion and a better understanding of the social problems relating to the clan, the village and the ethnic group and particularly relations with other clans, villages and ethnic groups.

The Bwiti has brought about changes in social structures, and the mystical bond that unites the initiates often eclipses blood ties. It has played a major political role. Some see it as a veritable State religion, as a national cult.

The liturgical rites are not very demanding and consist of chants and dances. It is adapted to modern life and the strictly occult side of the secret ceremonies is of diminished importance in relation to the outward opening of the ritual nights.

The Bwiti is not antichristian nor racist, and Europeans may join. Its universalist tendency blurs the distinctions between races and between sexes. The spirits in the next world are described as white, and during the ceremonies the initiates cover their faces with white powder, showing that they have penetrated in the beyond.

While the Catholic Church assembles its masses, the Bwiti cult is more of a family affair that assembles relatives and friends. With its chapels, it permits the heads of households to reunite their families and to give their authority a religious and sacred character that had become blunted since ancestor worship had been on the decline. Many excellent Christians see this cult as a complement to religion.

The Fang Bwiti is dynamic in the face of the universal religions, it is individualistic and feminist, and preserves the community spirit; this religion of Eboga is well adapted to society and is in full expansion. The Bwiti, which is favorable to individual accomplishments, has the further advantage of integrating all of man, and what the Christian derives from reading the Bible, the Bwitist knows through iboga.

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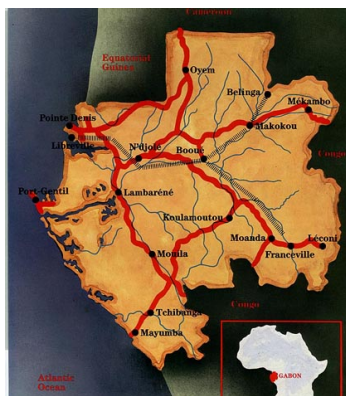
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